

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 48

ANTHONY BURGESS

Much of the interview was conducted through an exchange of letters from June 1971 until the summer of 1972. On December 2, 1972, a portion of the interview was taped at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies of the University of Wisconsin. Burgess's schedule during his two-day visit had been backbreaking; there was scarcely a break in the round of class visits, Joyce readings, and interviews. Tired as he appeared after that routine, Burgess showed no tendency to curb the flow of his responses; and his spoken portions, when spliced with the previous exchanges, seem as polished as a written draft.

—*John Cullinan, 1973*

INTERVIEWER

Are you at all bothered by the charges that you are too prolific or that your novels are too allusive?

ANTHONY BURGESS

It has been a sin to be prolific only since the Bloomsbury group—particularly Forster—made it a point of good manners to produce, as it were, costively. I've been annoyed less by sneers at my alleged overproduction than by the imputation that to write much means to write badly. I've always written with great care and even some slowness. I've just put in rather more hours a day at the task than some writers seem able to. As for allusiveness—meaning, I suppose, literary allusiveness—that's surely in the tradition. Any book has behind it all the other books that have been written. The author's aware of them; the reader ought to be aware, too.

INTERVIEWER

At what time of day do you usually work?

BURGESS

I don't think it matters much; I work in the morning, but I think the afternoon is a good time to work. Most people sleep in the afternoon. I've always found it a good time, especially if one doesn't have much lunch. It's a quiet time. It's a time when one's body is not at its sharpest, not at its most receptive—the body is quiescent, somnolent, but the brain can be quite sharp. I think, also, at the same time that the unconscious mind has a habit of asserting itself in the afternoon. The morning is the conscious time, but the afternoon is a time in which we should deal much more with the hinterland of the consciousness.

INTERVIEWER

That's very interesting. Thomas Mann, on the other hand, wrote religiously virtually every day from nine to one, as though he were punching a time clock.

BURGESS

Yes. One can work from nine to one, I think it's ideal; but I find that the afternoon must be used. The afternoon has always

been a good time for me. I think it began in Malaya when I was writing. I was working all morning. Most of us slept in the afternoon; it was very quiet. Even the servants were sleeping, even the dogs were asleep. One could work quietly away under the sun until dusk fell, and one was ready for the events of the evening. I do most of my work in the afternoon.

INTERVIEWER

Do you imagine an ideal reader for your books?

BURGESS

The ideal reader of my novels is a lapsed Catholic and failed musician, short-sighted, color-blind, auditorily biased, who has read the books that I have read. He should also be about my age.

INTERVIEWER

A very special reader indeed. Are you writing, then, for a limited, highly educated audience?

BURGESS

Where would Shakespeare have got if he had thought only of a specialized audience? What he did was to attempt to appeal on all levels, with something for the most rarefied intellectuals (who had read Montaigne) and very much more for those who could appreciate only sex and blood. I like to devise a plot that can have a moderately wide appeal. But take Eliot's *The Waste Land*, very erudite, which, probably through its more popular elements and its basic rhetorical appeal, appealed to those who did not at first understand it but made themselves understand it. The poem, a terminus of Eliot's polymathic travels, became a starting point for other people's erudition. I think every author wants to *make* his audience. But it's in his own image, and his primary audience is a mirror.

INTERVIEWER

Do you care about what the critics think?

BURGESS

I get angry at the stupidity of critics who willfully refuse to see what my books are really about. I'm aware of malevolence, especially in England. A bad review by a man I admire hurts terribly.

INTERVIEWER

Would you ever change the drift of a book—or any literary project—because of a critic's comments?

BURGESS

I don't think—with the exception of the excision of that whole final chapter of *A Clockwork Orange*—I've ever been asked to make any changes in what I've written. I do feel that the author has to know best about what he's writing—from the viewpoint of structure, intention, and so on. The critic has the job of explaining deep-level elements that the author couldn't know about. As for saying where—technically, in matters of taste and so on—a writer is going wrong, the critic rarely says what the author doesn't know already.

INTERVIEWER

You've mentioned the possibility of working with Stanley Kubrick on a film version of Napoleon's life. Can you remain completely independent in devising the novel you're currently writing about Napoleon?

BURGESS

The Napoleon project, which began with Kubrick, has now got beyond Kubrick. I found myself interested in the subject in a way that didn't suggest a film adaptation and am now working on something Kubrick couldn't use. It's a pity about the money and so on, but otherwise I'm glad to feel free, nobody looking over my shoulder.

INTERVIEWER

Has working as a professional reviewer either helped or hindered the writing of your novels?

BURGESS

It did no harm. It didn't stop me writing novels. It gave facility. It forced me into areas that I wouldn't have voluntarily entered. It paid the bills, which novels rarely do.

INTERVIEWER

Did it bring you involuntarily to any new subjects or books that have become important to you?

BURGESS

It's good for a writer to review books he is not supposed to know anything about or be interested in. Doing reviewing for magazines like *Country Life* (which smells more of horses than of calfskin bindings) means doing a fine heterogeneous batch, which often does open up areas of some value in one's creative work. For instance, I had to review books on stable management, embroidery, car engines—very useful solid stuff, the very stuff of novels. Reviewing Lévi-Strauss's little lecture on anthropology (which nobody else wanted to review) was the beginning of the process which led me to write the novel *MF*.

INTERVIEWER

You've stressed the importance of punctuality to a good reviewer. Do you find that a creative writer need stick to a strict work schedule, too?

BURGESS

The practice of being on time with commissioned work is an aspect of politeness. I don't like being late for appointments; I don't like craving indulgence from editors in the matter of missed deadlines. Good journalistic manners tend to lead to a kind of self-

discipline in creative work. It's important that a novel be approached with some urgency. Spend too long on it, or have great gaps between writing sessions, and the unity of the work tends to be lost. This is one of the troubles with *Ulysses*. The ending is different from the beginning. Technique changes halfway through. Joyce spent too long on the book.

INTERVIEWER

Are you suggesting that Molly Bloom's soliloquy is an inappropriate ending because it's technically different from the opening three chapters devoted to Stephen Dedalus?

BURGESS

I don't mean the very end of *Ulysses*. I mean that from the Cyclops episode on, Joyce decides to lengthen his chapters to make the reading time correspond with the imagined time of enactment. In that sense the book is technically not so much a unity as people like to think. Compare the Aeolus episode with the Oxen of the Sun and you'll see what I mean.

INTERVIEWER

Considering the length of time that Proust spent on his novel and that Mann devoted to *Joseph and His Brothers*, is seven years really so long for a work as great as *Ulysses*? What, then, about the seventeen years Joyce frittered away on *Finnegans Wake*?

BURGESS

Time spent on a book is perhaps no concern of the reader's, really. (*Madame Bovary*, a comparatively short book, took longer to write, surely, than the *Joseph* sequence.) The whole question is whether the writer can be the same person, with the same aims and approach to technique, over a long stretch of time. *Ulysses*, being innovative, had to go on being more and more innovative as it was written, and this makes it a sort of disunity. *Finnegans Wake*,

though it took much longer, got its essential technique established pretty early.

INTERVIEWER

Your new book, *Joysprick*, is coming out soon, I understand. How does it differ in emphasis from *Re: Joyce*?

BURGESS

It covers a little of the same ground but not very much. It's an attempt to examine the nature of Joyce's language, not from a strictly linguistic point of view but from a point of view which may be said to be exactly halfway between literary criticism and linguistics; it doesn't use many technical terms. It makes a phonetic analysis of Joyce's language; there aren't many linguists who can do this nowadays. Phonetics is rather old hat. But it does examine the dialects of *Ulysses*, the importance of establishing a pronunciation in *Finnegans Wake*, an analysis of the way Joyce constructs a sentence. It is not a profound book; it is meant to be a beginner's guide to the language of Joyce, and the real work of probing into Joyce's linguistic method must be left to a more scholarly person than myself.

INTERVIEWER

You say that you are taking what you call an old-fashioned phonetic approach to Joyce's language; and yet in *MF* you make use of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. Are you at all interested in considering Joyce from the point of view of structural linguistics?

BURGESS

I don't think that's my line; I think this has to be left to a scholar. I think somebody has to be in a university, has to be not engaged as I am in the production of books and teaching and lecturing and living a pretty varied "show-biz" life; this is a job for a cool scholar. I don't think I qualify to do it. I'm interested in what sounds Joyce is hearing when he is writing down the speech of Molly Bloom and

Leopold Bloom and the minor characters. It's a matter of great literary import, I would suggest, because the final monologue of Molly Bloom inclines a particular way of speech that is not consonant with her declared background. Here in Joyce there is something very implausible about the fact that Molly Bloom is the daughter of a major, brought up in the Gibraltar garrison, coming to Dublin speaking and thinking like any low Dublin fishwife. This seems to be totally inconsistent, and the point has not even been made before. I know Gibraltar better than Joyce did and better than most Joyce scholars. I'm trying to examine this.

INTERVIEWER

If Molly's monologue is too elegant, isn't it one of Joyce's points to have the poetic emerge from the demotic?

BURGESS

It's not elegant enough. I mean the fact that she uses Irish locutions like "Pshaw." She would not use any such term, she would not.

INTERVIEWER

There's a geographical thing.

BURGESS

There's a pattern implied. There's a social thing. In a very small garrison town like Gibraltar with this man, Major Tweedy, whose previous wife is Spanish, his half-Spanish daughter would speak either Spanish as a first language (and not with the usual grammar) or English as a first language—but certainly both languages, in the first instance in an Andalusian way, and in the second instance in a totally class-conscious, pseudo-patrician way. She would not come back to Dublin and suddenly start speaking like a Dublin fishwife.

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~~Pocapdedions~~
~~Et~~

○
~~Cent~~ mille dioux
Et Capdedions -
Reconnaissez les sons!
Pocapdedions
Et piadedions -
Des sons vraiment
Gascons.

Et ventradions,
Et merdedions -
Ainsi blasphème-t-on,
Pour des maîtres
indigner
a d'autres ~~à tout le monde~~
gens L'esprit vraiment
• Gascon.

INTERVIEWER

So Molly's language is probably closer in terms of social background to that of Nora Barnacle.

BURGESS

It is indeed; this final image is an image of Nora Barnacle and not of Molly at all. And as we know from Nora's letters, Joyce must have studied the letters and learned from them how to set down this warm womanly pattern of speech. Nora wrote the letters totally without punctuation, and sometimes it is hard to distinguish between a chunk of one of Nora's letters and a chunk of Molly's final monologue.

INTERVIEWER

I'm looking forward to this book. Have you thought of writing a long, expansive novel?

BURGESS

I have in mind two long novels—one on a theatrical family from the Middle Ages till today, the other on a great British composer. The projects are so big that I'm scared of starting on them.

INTERVIEWER

Could you begin with a few excerpts in the form of short stories?

BURGESS

I can't write short stories, not easily, anyway, and I'd rather keep my novel dark until it's ready for the light. I made the mistake once of publishing a chapter of an emergent novel in the *Transatlantic Review* and the sight of the extract in cold print turned me against the project. This is my one unfinished novel.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still hope to write a novel about Theseus's encounter

with the Minotaur, or has Rawcliffe's scenario in *Enderby* disposed of that project?

BURGESS

As for the Minotaur idea, I have thought of publishing a volume of all Enderby's poems, and they would include *The Pet Beast* (which has become, incidentally, the title of the Italian version of *Enderby*—*La Dolce Bestia*). I can see the sense of pretending that someone else has written your book for you, especially your book of poems. It frees you of responsibility—"Look, I know this is bad, but I didn't write it—one of my characters wrote it." *Don Quixote*, *Lolita*, *Ada*—it's an old and still lively tradition. I don't get writing blocks except from the stationer, but I do feel so sickened by what I write that I don't want to go on.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write the big scenes first, as Joyce Cary did?

BURGESS

I start at the beginning, go on to the end, then stop.

INTERVIEWER

Is each book charted completely in advance?

BURGESS

I chart a little first—list of names, rough synopsis of chapters, and so on. But one daren't overplan; so many things are generated by the sheer act of writing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write nonfiction any differently?

BURGESS

The process is the same.

INTERVIEWER

Is the finished product much influenced by the fact that you do the first draft on the typewriter?

BURGESS

I don't write drafts. I do page one many, many times and move on to page two. I pile up sheet after sheet, each in its final state, and at length I have a novel that doesn't—in my view—need any revision.

INTERVIEWER

Then you don't revise at all?

BURGESS

Revising, as I said, is done with each page, not with each chapter or the whole book. Rewriting a whole book would bore me.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you decide to continue *Inside Mr. Enderby*, the first half of *Enderby*, after several years?

BURGESS

I planned the work as the long book that came out in America, but—since I was approaching the end of the one year that the doctors had given me to live—I was not able to do more than the first half in 1959–60. Unwillingness of the publishers to publish *Inside Mr. Enderby*—as Part I was called in England—made me delay the writing of Part II. But I had it all in my mind right at the start.

INTERVIEWER

After the doctors had diagnosed a brain tumor following your collapse in a Brunei classroom, why did you choose to write during that “terminal year” rather than travel, say? Were you confined in semi-invalid status?

BURGESS

I was no semi-invalid. I was very fit and active. (This made me doubt the truth of the diagnosis.) But to travel the world one needs money, and this I didn't have. It's only in fiction that "terminal year" men have something tucked away. The fact is that my wife and I needed to eat and so on, and the only job I could do (who would employ me?) was writing. I wrote much because I was paid little. I had no great desire to leave a literary name behind me.

INTERVIEWER

Did your style change at all during that year, possibly as a result of your feeling under sentence?

BURGESS

I don't think so. I was old enough to have established some kind of narrative style; but the real business of working on style, of course, came later. The novels written in this so-called quasi-terminal year—pseudoterminal year—were not written with, you know, excessive speed; it was just a matter of working hard every day, working very hard every day—and *all* day—including the evenings. A good deal of care went into the works, and what people look for in what seems an excessive amount of production is evidence of carelessness. There may be a little of that; but it's not because of the speed or apparent speed but because of flaws in my own makeup. I don't think it is possible to say that a particular work is obviously written during the terminal year. I don't think there is any qualitative difference between the various novels; and certainly I was not aware of any influence on style, on way of writing, caused by this knowledge.

INTERVIEWER

Several of your novels contain poetry written by various characters. Have you thought of writing poetry again seriously?

BURGESS

I've seen produced my version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. This is in rhyme, and it worked well, as I expected it to. But I don't plan volumes of verse—too naked, too personal. I plan further stage translations—*Peer Gynt*, Chekhov's *Chaika*—and I'm working on a musical of *Ulysses*. I'm much more likely to return to music. I've been asked to write a clarinet concerto, and my music to *Cyrano* has gone down well enough.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever use musical forms in designing your novels?

BURGESS

Ah yes, one can learn a lot from musical forms, I'm planning a novel in the style of a classical symphony—minuet and all. The motivations will be purely formal, so that a development section in which sexual fantasies are enacted can follow a realistic exposition with neither explanation nor transitional device, returning to it (now as recapitulation) with a similar lack of psychological justification or formal trickery.

INTERVIEWER

Composers traffic heavily in transitions. Isn't this particular instance of literary composition by musical analogy an example of "formal trickery," best understood by the reader who is at least an amateur musician?

BURGESS

I think that music does teach practitioners in other arts useful formal devices, but the reader doesn't have to know their provenance. Here's an example: A composer modulates from one key to another by the use of the "punning" chord, the augmented sixth (punning because it is also a dominant seventh). You can change, in a novel, from one scene to another by using a phrase or statement common to both—this is quite common. If the phrase or statement

means different things in the different contexts, so much the more musical.

INTERVIEWER

One notices that the form of *A Vision of Battlements* is meant to be similar to that of Ennis's *Passacaglia*, but can any but the most tenuously analogous relation be established between literature and music generally?

BURGESS

I agree that the musico-literary analogies can be pretty tenuous, but in the widest possible formal sense—sonata form, opera, and so on—we've hardly begun to explore the possibilities. The Napoleon novel I'm writing apes the *Eroica* formally—irritable, quick, swiftly transitional in the first movement (up to Napoleon's coronation); slow, very leisurely, with a binding beat suggesting a funeral march for the second. This isn't pure fancy: It's an attempt to unify a mass of historical material in the comparatively brief space of about 150,000 words. As for the reader having to know about music—it doesn't really matter much. In one novel I wrote, "The orchestra lunged into a loud chord of twelve notes, all of them different." Musicians hear the discord, nonmusicians don't, but there's nothing there to baffle them and prevent them reading on. I don't understand baseball terms, but I can still enjoy Malamud's *The Natural*. I don't play bridge, but I find the bridge game in Fleming's *Moonraker* absorbing—it's the emotions conveyed that matter, not what the players are doing with their hands.

INTERVIEWER

What about film technique as an influence on your writing?

BURGESS

I've been much more influenced by the stage than by the film. I write in scenes too long for unbroken cinematic representation. But I like to run a scene through in my mind before writing it down,

seeing everything happen, hearing some of the dialogue. I've written for both television and cinema, but not very successfully. Too literary, or something. I get called in by makers of historical films to revise the dialogue, which they then restore to its original form.

INTERVIEWER

What happened to the proposed film versions of *Enderby* and *Nothing Like the Sun*?

BURGESS

The filming of *Enderby* fell through because the producer dropped dead at the Cannes film festival. The Shakespeare project came almost when Warner Brothers was being sold, and all existing enterprises were scrapped when the new regime started. It may, however, yet be fulfilled. Film people are very conservative about dialogue: They honestly believe that the immediate grasp of lexical meaning is more important than the impact of rhythm and emotionally charged sound. It's regarded as cleverer to pretend that the people of the past would have spoken like us if they'd been lucky enough to know how to do so, delighted with the opportunity to view themselves and their times from our angle. *The Lion in Winter* is thought to be a triumphant solution of the medieval dialogue problem, but of course it's just cheap.

INTERVIEWER

Does your novel in progress pose any special linguistic problems that may create obstacles for Stanley Kubrick as well?

BURGESS

The Napoleon novel is difficult from the dialogue angle, but my instinct tells me to use rhythms and vocabulary not much different from our own. After all, Byron's *Don Juan* could almost have been written today. I imagine the soldiers speaking as today's soldiers speak.

They're speaking in French, anyway. As for the Napoleon film, Kubrick must go his own way, and he'll find it a difficult way.

INTERVIEWER

Do you expect to write any more historical novels?

BURGESS

I'm working on a novel intended to express the feel of England in Edward III's time, using Dos Passos's devices. I believe there's great scope in the historical novel, so long as it isn't by Mary Renault or Georgette Heyer. The fourteenth century of my novel will be mainly evoked in terms of smell and visceral feelings, and it will carry an undertone of general disgust rather than hey-nonny nostalgia.

INTERVIEWER

Which of Dos Passos's techniques will you use?

BURGESS

The novel I have in mind, and for which I've done a ninety-page plan, is about the Black Prince. I thought it might be amusing blatantly to steal the Camera Eye and the Newsreel devices from Dos Passos just to see how they might work, especially with the Black Death and Crécy and the Spanish campaign. The effect might be of the fourteenth century going on in another galaxy where language and literature had somehow got themselves into the twentieth century. The technique might make the historical characters look remote and rather comic—which is what I want.

INTERVIEWER

Are Mary Renault's retellings of Greek myths as bad as all that?

BURGESS

Oh, they're not unsatisfactory, far from it. Rattling good reads if you like that sort of thing. They just don't excite me, that's all. It's undoubtedly my fault.

INTERVIEWER

Do you expect to write another novel of the future, like *A Clockwork Orange* or *The Wanting Seed*?

BURGESS

I don't plan a novel about the future except for a mad novella in which England has become a mere showplace run by America.

INTERVIEWER

Is England going to become simply an oversized tourist boutique—or the fifty-first state?

BURGESS

I used to think that England might become just a place that liked to be visited—like that island in J. M. Barrie's *Mary Rose*—but now I see that so many of the things worth seeing—old things—are disappearing so that England can become a huge Los Angeles, all motorways, getting about more important than actually getting anywhere. England is now going into Europe, not—as I had once expected and even hoped—America, and I think it will now have Europe's faults without its virtues. The decimal coinage is a monstrosity, and soon there'll be liters of beer, as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and no cheap wine or caporal tobacco. Absorption, anyway, since England either has to absorb or be absorbed. Napoleon has won.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned that *A Clockwork Orange* has a concluding chapter in the British edition that isn't available in the American ones. Does this bother you?

BURGESS

Yes, I hate having two different versions of the same book. The U.S. edition has a chapter short, and hence the arithmological plan

is messed up. Also, the implied view of juvenile violence as something to go through and then grow out of is missing in the American edition; and this reduces the book to a mere parable, whereas it was intended to be a novel.

INTERVIEWER

What happens in that twenty-first chapter?

BURGESS

In Chapter 21 Alex grows up and realizes that ultraviolence is a bit of a bore, and it's time he had a wife and a malenky googoo-gooing malchickiwick to call him dadada. This was meant to be a mature conclusion, but nobody in America has ever liked the idea.

INTERVIEWER

Did Stanley Kubrick consider filming the Heinemann version?

BURGESS

Kubrick discovered the existence of this final chapter when he was halfway through the film, but it was too late to think of altering the concept. Anyway, he, too, an American, thought it too milk-and-watery. I don't know what to think now. After all, it's twelve years since I wrote the thing.

INTERVIEWER

Did you attempt to get the complete novel published here?

BURGESS

Yes—well, I was very dubious about the book itself. When I wrote the book, my agent was not willing to present it to a publisher, which is rather unusual; and the sort of publishers in England were very dubious about the book. So when the American publisher made this objection to the final chapter, I didn't feel myself to be in a very strong position. I was a little hesitant to judge the book; I was a little too close to it. I thought: Well, they

may be right. Because authors do tend to be (especially after the completion of a book) very uncertain about the value of the book; and perhaps I gave in a little too weakly, but my concern was partly a financial one. I wanted it to be published in America, and I wanted some money out of it. So I said, "Yes." Whether I'd say "Yes" now, I don't know; but I've been persuaded by so many critics that the book is better in its American form that I say, "All right, they know best."

INTERVIEWER

Would it be possible for an American press to put out a limited, hardbound edition which includes the excluded chapter as a sort of appendix?

BURGESS

I think this should be possible. The best way of doing it is to bring out an annotated edition of the book with this final chapter—an idea which is being resisted by my publishers for some reason, I don't know why. I would be very interested in the comments of the average, say, American student on the differences between the two versions. Because I'm not able to judge myself very clearly now as to whether I was right or wrong. What is *your* opinion, what do you feel about that?

INTERVIEWER

I find the last chapter problematical in that while it creates an entirely different context for the work, it seems anticlimactic after the neat resurrection of the old Alex in the twentieth chapter.

BURGESS

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Still it should remain, because your meaning is altered by the cutting off of the context.

BURGESS

Well, the worst example I know of unjustified translation is to be found in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*, where in the British edition, under the imprint of Bodley Head, Graham Greene has taken upon himself to present *Parade's End* as a trilogy, saying he doesn't think the final novel, *The Last Post*, works, and he feels perhaps Ford would have agreed with him; and therefore he has taken the liberty of getting rid of the final book. I think Greene is wrong; I think that whatever Ford said, the work is a tetralogy, and the thing is severely maimed with the loss of his final book. An author is not to be trusted in his judgment of this sort of thing. Authors very frequently try to be indifferent to their books. Certainly they are so sick of their books that they don't want to make any serious judgment on them. The problem comes up, you see, when one reads Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*, because this frightful ending (where Tony Last spends all his time reading Dickens to this half-breed in the jungle), appeared previously as a short story; and knowing the short story one has a strange attitude to the book. Which makes us feel that here is a deliberate pasting together, where this giant figure at the end that turns up does not spring automatically out of the book but is just taken arbitrarily from another work. Perhaps one shouldn't know too much about these things. Of course, one can't avoid it. These two versions of Samuel Butler's *Way of All Flesh*—this raises the problem. Which version would we like better, which is the right version? It's better to know only one thing, to be fairly ignorant of what was going on. You know, behind the version we know.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't this an argument against publishing a complete *A Clockwork Orange*, since a twenty-chapter version is embedded in everyone's mind?

BURGESS

I don't know; they're both relevant. They seem to me to express in a sense the difference between the British approach to life and the American approach to life. There may be something very profound to say about this difference in these different presentations of the novel. I don't know; I'm not able to judge.

INTERVIEWER

In *A Clockwork Orange* and *Enderby* especially there's a persistent strain of mockery toward youth culture and its music. Is there anything good about them?

BURGESS

I despise whatever is obviously ephemeral and yet is shown as possessing some kind of ultimate value. The Beatles, for instance. Most youth culture, especially music, is based on so little knowledge of tradition, and it often elevates ignorance into a virtue. Think of the musically illiterate who set themselves up as "arrangers." And youth is so conformist, so little concerned with maverick values, so proud of being rather than making, so bloody sure that it and it alone *knows*.

INTERVIEWER

You used to play in a jazz band. Is there any hope that their interest in rock music may lead youth to jazz—or even to classical music?

BURGESS

I still play jazz, chiefly on a four-octave electric organ, and I prefer this to listening to it. I don't think jazz is for listening but for playing. I'd like to write a novel about a jazz pianist or, better, about a pub pianist—which I once was, like my father before me. I don't think rock leads on to a liking for jazz. The kids are depressingly static in their tastes. They do so want *words*, and jazz gets along very nicely without words.

INTERVIEWER

In two of your novels the wordsmiths Shakespeare and Enderby are inspired by the Muse. But you've said as well that you like to regard your books as "works of craftsmanship for sale."

BURGESS

The Muse in *Nothing Like the Sun* was not a real muse—only syphilis. The girl in *Enderby* is really sex, which, like syphilis, has something to do with the creative process. I mean, you can't be a genius and sexually impotent. I still think that inspiration comes out of the act of making an artifact, a work of craft.

INTERVIEWER

Are works of art the products of strong libido?

BURGESS

Yes, I think art is sublimated libido. You can't be a eunuch priest, and you can't be a eunuch artist. I became interested in syphilis when I worked for a time at a mental hospital full of GPI cases. I discovered there was a correlation between the spirochete and mad talent. The tubercle also produces a lyrical drive. Keats had both.

INTERVIEWER

Has your interest in Mann's *Doctor Faustus* influenced the use of syphilis and other diseases in your own work?

BURGESS

I've been much influenced by the thesis of Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, but I wouldn't want to have syphilis myself in order to be Wagner or Shakespeare or Henry VIII. Some prices are too high to pay. Oh, you'll want examples of these GPI talents. There was one man who'd turned himself into a kind of Scriabin, another who could give you the day of the week for any date in history, another who wrote poems like Christopher Smart. Many patients were

orators or grandiose liars. It was like being imprisoned in a history of European art. Politics as well.

INTERVIEWER

Have you used in your novels any of the GPI cases that you encountered?

BURGESS

I did have the intention at one time of writing a long novel—a kind of *Magic Mountain*, I suppose—about life in a mental hospital; and perhaps I may yet get down to it. Of course, the trouble is it would take on a kind of political significance. People might think of works like *Cancer Ward*; it might be thought as presenting a clearly marked division between the patients and the hospital staff. One would be trading in a sort of political allegory; it's so easy to do that. Yet what interests me about a mental hospital that specializes in General Paralysis of the Insane is this relationship between disease and talent. Some of the tremendous skills that these patients show—these tremendous mad abilities—all stem out of the spirochete. I have pursued this in a couple of novels (or at least in one novel), but to do it on a larger scale would require a kind of rationale which I haven't yet worked out. I don't think it should be done purely as a documentary novel, as a naturalistic presentation of what life is like in such hospitals; but it does suggest to me that it's tied up with symbols of some kind—tied up with an interior, deeper meaning. Of course one never knows what this meaning will be, but *The Magic Mountain* has its deeper meanings beneath the naturalistic surface. I wouldn't want to imitate that. One has to wait, I'm afraid—a long time sometimes—for the experience one's had to present itself in workable form, as a form that can be shaped into something like a work of art.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see any contradiction in choosing a craftsman like Joyce as one of your literary models while classifying yourself as a “Grub Street writer” at the same time?

BURGESS

Why contradiction? But I’ve never really regarded Joyce as a literary model. Joyce can’t be imitated, and there’s no imitation Joyce in my work. All you can learn from Joyce is the exact use of language. “Grub Street writer” means Dr. Johnson as well as our wretched columnists, and Johnson was an exact user of language.

INTERVIEWER

You’ve certainly studied Joyce very thoroughly. Does knowing what he has done open more doors than it closes?

BURGESS

Joyce opened doors only to his own narrow world; his experiments were for himself only. But all novels are experimental, and *Finnegans Wake* is no more spectacular an experiment than, say, *Prancing Nigger* or *His Monkey Wife*. It looks spectacular because of the language. *MF*, believe it or not, is a completely original experiment.

INTERVIEWER

Isn’t Joyce’s attempt to devote virtually an entire novel to the Unconscious more than a purely linguistic experiment?

BURGESS

Yes, of course. The wakeworld is only narrow in that it’s asleep, fixed on one set of impulses only, has too few characters.

INTERVIEWER

Can’t contemporary writers use some of Joyce’s techniques without being mere imitators?

BURGESS

You can't use Joyce's techniques without being Joyce. Technique and material are one. You can't write like Beethoven without writing Beethoven, unless you're Beethoven.

INTERVIEWER

Has Nabokov influenced your work at all? You've praised *Lolita* highly.

BURGESS

Reading *Lolita* meant that I enjoyed using lists of things in *The Right to an Answer*. I've not been much influenced by Nabokov, nor do I intend to be. I was writing the way I write before I knew he existed. But I've not been impressed so much by another writer in the last decade or so.

INTERVIEWER

Yet you've been called an "English Nabokov," probably because of the cosmopolitan strain and verbal ingenuity in your writing.

BURGESS

No influence. He's a Russian, I'm English. I meet him halfway in certain temperamental endowments. He's very artificial, though.

INTERVIEWER

In what way?

BURGESS

Nabokov is a natural dandy on the grand international scale. I'm still a provincial boy scared of being too nattily dressed. All writing is artificial, and Nabokov's artifacts are only contrived in the *récit* part. His dialogue is always natural and masterly (when he wants it to be). *Pale Fire* is only termed a novel because there's no other term for it. It's a masterly literary artifact that is poem, commentary, casebook, allegory, sheer structure. But I note that

most people go back to reading the poem, not what surrounds the poem. It's a fine poem, of course. Where Nabokov goes wrong, I think, is in sometimes *sounding* old-fashioned—a matter of rhythm, as though Huysmans is to him a sound and modern writer whose tradition is worthy to be worked in. John Updike sounds old-fashioned sometimes in the same way—glorious vocabulary and imagery but a lack of muscle in the rhythm.

INTERVIEWER

Does Nabokov rank at the top with Joyce?

BURGESS

He won't go down in history as one of the greatest names. He's unworthy to unlatch Joyce's shoe.

INTERVIEWER

Have any new writers appeared of late that you think are destined for greatness?

BURGESS

I can't think of any in England. The trouble with American writers is that they die before becoming great—Nathanael West, Scott Fitzgerald, etc. Mailer will become a great autobiographer. Ellison will be great if only he'll write more. Too many *homines unius libri* like Heller.

INTERVIEWER

American writers certainly tend to burn themselves out early, at least. Do you think it takes more than one book for a writer to earn the label "great"?

BURGESS

A man can write one book that can be great, but this doesn't make him a great writer—just the writer of a great book. Samuel Butler's *Way of All Flesh* is a great novel, but nobody calls Butler

a great novelist. I think a writer has to extend very widely, as well as plunge very deep, to be a great novelist.

INTERVIEWER

Did Fitzgerald write a great novel?

BURGESS

I don't think Fitzgerald's books great—style too derivatively romantic, far less of that curious freshness of vision than you find in Hemingway—Hemingway is a great novelist, I think, but he never wrote a great novel (a great novella, yes). I think America likes its artists to die young, in atonement for materialist America's sins. The English leave the dying young to Celts like Dylan Thomas and Behan. But I can't understand the American literary block—as in Ellison or Salinger—unless it means that the blocked man isn't forced economically to write (as the English writer, lacking campuses and grants, usually is) and hence can afford the luxury of fearing the critics' pounce on a new work not as good as the last (or the first). American writers drink a lot when they're "blocked," and drunkenness—being a kind of substitute for art—makes the block worse. I've found it best, especially since my first wife, who drank less than I, died of cirrhosis, to drink little. But I smoke much, and that's probably worse than five martinis a day.

INTERVIEWER

You've spoken highly of Defoe as a novelist and practical journalist, and you also admire Sterne as a writer. What special appeal do these eighteenth-century writers have for you?

BURGESS

I admire Defoe because he worked hard. I admire Sterne because he did everything the French are trying so unhandily to do now. Eighteenth-century prose has a tremendous vitality and scope. Not Fielding, though. Sentimental, too much given to contrivances.

Sterne and Swift (who, Joyce said, should have exchanged names) are men one can learn technically from all the time.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of the French—your playful novels of ideas tend to be more in the French literary tradition, perhaps, than any other. Has this kept them from becoming better known in England and America?

BURGESS

The novels I've written are really medieval Catholic in their thinking, and people don't want that today. God forbid they should be "French." If they're not read, it's because the vocabulary is too big, and people don't like using dictionaries when they're reading mere novels. I don't give a damn, anyway.

INTERVIEWER

This Catholic emphasis accounts in part for the frequent comparisons made between your novels and Evelyn Waugh's, and yet you've said you don't find Waugh's aristocratic idea of Catholicism attractive. What do you like about his work?

BURGESS

Waugh is funny, Waugh is elegant, Waugh is economical. His Catholicism, which I despise as all cradle Catholics despise converts, is the thing in him which means least to me. Indeed, it injures his *Sword of Honour*.

INTERVIEWER

This charge has often been made—along with that of sentimentality—against *Brideshead Revisited*, but *Sword of Honour* is often called the best novel in English about World War II. How does Waugh's (or Guy Crouchback's) Catholicism weaken it?

BURGESS

Crouchback's Catholicism weakens *Sword of Honour* in the sense that it sectarianizes the book—I mean, we have Crouchback's moral view of the war, and this is not enough. We need something that lies beneath religion. In our age it's a weakness to make Catholic theology the basis of a novel since it means everything's cut and dried and the author doesn't have to rethink things out. The weakness of Greene's *Heart of the Matter* is derived from its author's fascination with theology: the sufferings of the hero are theological sufferings, invalid outside the narrow field of Catholicism. When I taught Waugh and Greene to Muslim students in Malaya, they used to laugh. Why can't this man have two wives if he wants them, they would say. What's wrong with eating the bit of bread the priest gives you when you've been sleeping with a woman not your wife, and so on. They never laughed at the tragic heroes of the Greeks and Elizabethans.

INTERVIEWER

Does the difference between cradle and convert Catholicism influence an author's work in such an essential way that you tend to prefer a novelist like François Mauriac to Graham Greene?

BURGESS

English converts to Catholicism tend to be bemused by its glamor and even look for more glamor in it than is actually there—like Waugh, dreaming of an old English Catholic aristocracy, or Greene, fascinated by sin in a very cold-blooded way. I wished I liked Mauriac more as a writer. The fact is that I prefer the converted Catholics because they happen to be better novelists. I do try to forget that Greene is a Catholic when I read him. He, too, is now, I think, trying to forget. *The Comedians* was a kind of philosophical turning point. *Travels with My Aunt* is deliciously free of morality of any kind, except a very delightful kind of inverted morality.

INTERVIEWER

In an essay on Waugh you mentioned “the Puritan that lurks in every English Catholic.” Do you see this residue of Puritanism lurking in your own writing at all?

BURGESS

Of course it's in me. We English take our Catholicism seriously, which the Italians and French don't, and that makes us earnest and obsessed about sin. We really absorbed hell—perhaps a very Nordic notion—and think about it when committing adultery. I'm so puritanical that I can't describe a kiss without blushing.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any limits that you think an author should observe in the language he uses to present controversial subject matter?

BURGESS

My aversion to describing amorous details in my work is probably that I treasure physical love so highly I don't want to let strangers in on it. For, after all, when we describe copulation we're describing our own experiences. I like privacy. I think that other writers should do what they can do, and if they can spend—as one of my American girl students did—ten pages on the act of fellatio without embarrassing themselves, very good luck to them. But I think there's more artistic pleasure to be gained from the ingenious circumvention of a taboo than from what is called total permissiveness. When I wrote my first Enderby novel, I had to make my hero say “For cough,” since “Fuck off” was not then acceptable. With the second book the climate had changed, and Enderby was at liberty to say “Fuck off.” I wasn't happy. It was too easy. He still said “For cough,” while others responded with “Fuck off.” A compromise. Literature, however, thrives on taboos, just as all art thrives on technical difficulties.

INTERVIEWER

Several years ago you wrote, “I believe the wrong God is temporarily ruling the world and that the true God has gone under,” and added that the novelist’s vocation predisposes him to this Manichaeian view. Do you still believe this?

BURGESS

I still hold this belief.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think that the novelist is predisposed to regard the world in terms of “essential opposition”? Unlike the Manichaeians you seem to maintain a traditional Christian belief in original sin.

BURGESS

Novels are about conflicts. The novelist’s world is one of essential oppositions of character, aspiration, and so on. I’m only a Manichee in the widest sense of believing that duality is the ultimate reality; the original-sin bit is not really a contradiction, though it does lead one on to depressingly French heresies, like Graham Greene’s own Jansenism, as well as Albigensianism (Joan of Arc’s religion), Catharism, and so on. I’m entitled to an eclectic theology as a novelist, if not as a human being.

INTERVIEWER

In planning your novels, have you ever considered separating them, as Simenon does, into “commercial” and “uncommercial” works or, like Greene, into “novels” and “entertainments”?

BURGESS

All my novels belong to the one category—intended to be, as it were, serious entertainment, no moral aim, no solemnity. I want to please.

INTERVIEWER

Aren't you divorcing morality from aesthetics? This view is certainly consistent with your dismissal in *Shakespeare* of the Anglo-Saxon notion that a great artist must have a great moral sensibility.

BURGESS

I don't divorce morals and aesthetics. I merely believe that a man's literary greatness is no index of his personal ethics. I don't, true, think that the job of literature is to teach us how to behave, but I think it can make clearer the whole business of moral choice by showing what the nature of life's problems is. It's after truth, which is not goodness.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that the novel gets an implied set of values derived from religion but that other arts, such as music and architecture, are, unlike fiction, "neutral." Does this make them more or less attractive at this point?

BURGESS

I enjoy writing music precisely because one is divorced from "human" considerations like belief, conduct. Pure form, nothing more. But then I tend to despise music just because it is so *mindless*. I've been writing a string quartet based on a musical theme that Shakespeare throws at us, in sol-fa notation, in *Love's Labour's Lost* (the theme is CDGAEF), and it's been pure, bliss. I've been thoroughly absorbed by it, on planes, in hotel bedrooms, anywhere where I had nothing else to do and there was no bloody Muzak playing. (Don't the Muzak purveyors ever think of the people who actually have to write music?) Now I'm a little ashamed that the music engages nothing but purely formal problems. So I oscillate between a hankering after pure form and a realization that literature is probably valuable because it *says things*.

INTERVIEWER

How does political neutrality figure in all this? In your novels the neutrals, such as Mr. Theodorescu in *Tremor of Intent*, are usually villains.

BURGESS

If art should be neutral, if it can, life should be committed, if it can. There's no connection between political and religious neutrality and that blessed *achieved* neutrality of, say, music. Art is, so to speak, the church triumphant, but the rest of life is in the church militant. I believe that good and evil exist, though they have nothing to do with art, and that evil has to be resisted. There's no inconsistency in holding an aesthetic so different from such an ethic.

INTERVIEWER

Several of your recent novels have exotic foreign settings, even though you remarked a few years ago that the artist should exhaust the resources of the "here and now" as a true test of his art. Have you changed your mind?

BURGESS

Yes, I changed my mind. I'm limited by temperament, I now discover, to being moved or excited by any place in the world so long as it's not England. This means that all my settings must be "exotic."

INTERVIEWER

Why do you consider England so dull a subject?

BURGESS

Dull for me if not for others. I like societies where there's a dynamism of conflict. In other words, I think novels should be about the whole of a society—by implication if nothing else—and not just a little pocket inside. English fiction tends to be about

these pockets—love affairs in Hampstead, Powell's bohemian aristocracy, Snow's men of power. Dickens gave you the lot, like Balzac. Much modern American fiction gives you the lot. You could reconstruct the whole of modern America from even a little mad fantasy like Phil Roth's *The Breast*. But I may have a personal thing about England—a sense of exclusion, and so on. It may even be so simple a matter as liking extreme climates, fights in bars, exotic waterfronts, fish soup, a lot of garlic. I find it easier to imagine a surrealistic version of New Jersey than of old England, though I could see some American genius making a whole strange world of Mr. Heath's inheritance. Probably (as Thomas Pynchon never went to Valletta or Kafka to America) it's best to imagine your own foreign country. I wrote a very good account of Paris before I ever went there. Better than the real thing.

INTERVIEWER

Was this in *The Worm and the Ring*?

BURGESS

Yes. Paris was a town I always tried to avoid: But I've been more and more in it recently and find that the account of Paris I wrote (although it smells of maps and tourist guides) is not unlike the reality. This is true also with Joyce's Gibraltar in *Ulysses*; one has no need to visit the country to write about the country.

INTERVIEWER

And yet you draw a good picture of Leningrad in *Honey for the Bears*.

BURGESS

Oh, I knew Leningrad. Yes, that's right. But not too well; for if one gets to know a town too well, then the sharpness of the impression is blunted, and one is not interested in writing about it. Anyway, the interesting point is that one first meets a town through its smells; this is especially true in Europe. Leningrad has

a peculiar smell of its own, and you become habituated to these smells in time, and you forget what they are; and you're not able to approach it in those highly sensuous terms when writing about it if you know a place too well. If you're in a town for about a month somewhere, you can't retain a sensuous impression. As with Paris, you smell the Gauloise when you arrive, but you cease to smell the Gauloise in time. You get so used to it.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that Leningrad resembles Manchester. How are they alike?

BURGESS

I think it was just the sense of the architecture, the rather broken-down architecture of Leningrad, the sense of large numbers of the working class, rather shabbily dressed. And I suppose in some ways the *smell* of Manchester—I always associated Manchester with the smell of tanneries, very pungent smells, as you know. I got this same smell out of Leningrad. It's a small thing, but these small things have a curious habit of becoming important. You try to fix a place in your mind. I don't know what the smell of Milwaukee is, I don't think the American cities have any smell. That's probably why they are rather unmemorable. Smell is most elusive of the senses. To a novelist it is somehow the most important of the senses.

INTERVIEWER

You've also said that the serious novelist should be prepared to stay in one place and really get to know it. Do you hope to do this with Italy now?

BURGESS

Again, I seem to have changed my mind. I think I shall want to invent places more than merely reproduce them, and don't please put this down to the influence of *Ada*. The next four novels

will be set, respectively, in medieval England, modern New Jersey, Italy in the last fifty years, Jane Austen's England.

INTERVIEWER

Have your travels given you a special sense of the variety of human types, such as Forster's Prof. Godbole?

BURGESS

Fundamentally people are all the same, and I've lived among enough different races long enough to be dogmatic about this. Godbole in *A Passage to India* is an eccentric mystic of the type that any culture can throw up.

INTERVIEWER

At this point do you regard yourself as an expatriate Englishman or as an exile?

BURGESS

A verbal quibble. I've voluntarily exiled myself, but not forever. Nevertheless, I can't think of any good reason for going back to England except on a holiday. But one is, as Simone Weil said, faithful to the cuisine one was brought up on, and that probably constitutes patriotism. I am sometimes mentally and physically ill for Lancashire food—hot pot, lobscouse, and so on—and I have to have these things. I'm loyal to Lancashire, I suppose, but not strongly enough to wish to go back and live there.

INTERVIEWER

What are "hot pot" and "lobscouse"?

BURGESS

Hot pot, or Lancashire hot pot, is made in this way. An earthenware dish, a layer of trimmed lamb chops, a layer of sliced onions, a layer of sliced potatoes, then continue the layers till you reach the top. Add seasoned stock. On top put mushrooms or

more potato slices to brown. Add oysters or kidneys as well if you wish. Bake in a moderate oven for a long time. Eat with pickled cabbage. Lobsouse is a sailor's dish from Liverpool (Liverpudlians are called "scousers" or "scowsers") and is very simple. Dice potatoes and onions and cook in a pan of seasoned water. When they're nearly done, get rid of excess liquid and add a can or two of cubed (or diced) corned beef. Heat gently. Eat with mixed pickles. I love cooking these dishes, and, once known, everybody loves them. They're honest and simple. Lancashire has a great cuisine, including a notable shop cuisine—meaning you can buy great delicacies in shops. Lancashire women traditionally work in the cotton mills and cook dinner only at weekends. Hence the things you can get in cooked food shops—fish and chips, Bury puddings, Eccles cakes, tripe, cowheel, meat pies (hot, with gravy poured into a hole from a jug), and so on. Fish and chips is now, I think, internationally accepted. Meat and potato pie is perhaps the greatest of the Lancashire dishes—a "drier" hot pot with a fine flaky crust.

INTERVIEWER

I'm tempted to visit Manchester. Lawrence Durrell, another expatriate English writer, has said that since America and Russia are going to determine our future, one is obliged to stop traveling and start thinking when one is in either country. It's different, he says, from going to Italy—a pure pleasure. Do you agree?

BURGESS

Durrell has never yet said anything I could agree with. He reminds me of that TV show woman in America, Virginia Graham. I just don't know what the hell he can mean by that. In America and Russia I meet people, get drunk, eat, just as I do in Italy. I see no signs of purely metaphysical import. Those are left to governments, and governments are what I try to ignore. All governments are evil, including that of Italy.

INTERVIEWER

That sounds vaguely anarchic, or at least un-American. Did you have an undergraduate Marxist period, like Victor Crabbe in *The Long Day Wanes*?

BURGESS

I was never a Marxist, though I was always, even as an undergraduate, ready to play the Marxist game—analyzing Shakespeare in Marxist terms, and so on. I always loved dialectical materialism. But it was a structuralist love from the start. To take socialism seriously, as opposed to minimal socialization (what America needs so desperately), is ridiculous.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't "minimal socialization" require an increase in the size and power of central government? Only the American federal government can fund the equivalent of the English or Scandinavian health plans; the need for inexpensive medical treatment is acute here.

BURGESS

I loathe the State but concede that socialized medicine is a priority in any civilized country today. In England it saved me from bankruptcy during my wife's final illness (though perhaps a private insurance policy might have taken care of it. You can't opt out of the state scheme, however). Socialized medicine—which in England was a liberal idea, anyway—doesn't have to mean out-and-out socialism with everything nationalized. If America gets it, it will be only the doctors and dentists who will try not to make it work, but, as in England, there's no reason why a private practice shouldn't coexist with a national health one. You go to a dentist in England, and he says "Private or National Health?" The difference in treatment is hardly noticeable, but the State materials (tooth fillings, spectacles, and so on) are inferior to what you buy as a private patient.

INTERVIEWER

Do these views make you a political conservative, then? You've said you would reluctantly vote conservative in England.

BURGESS

I think I'm a Jacobite, meaning that I'm traditionally Catholic, support the Stuart monarchy and want to see it restored, and distrust imposed change even when it seems to be for the better. I honestly believe that America should become monarchist (preferably Stuart) because with a limited monarchy you have no president, and a president is one more corruptible element in government. I hate all republics. I suppose my conservatism, since the ideal of a Catholic Jacobite imperial monarch isn't practicable, is really a kind of anarchism.

INTERVIEWER

Many Americans believe their presidency has evolved into a form of monarchy, with unhappy results. Do you see anarchy as a viable political alternative?

BURGESS

The U.S. presidency is a Tudor monarchy plus telephones. Your alternative is either a return to the limited monarchy of the British Commonwealth—a constitutional monarch is at least out of politics and can't get dirty or corrupt—or devolution into unfederated states with a loose cooperative framework for large development schemes. Anarchy is a man's own thing, and I think it's too late in the day to think of it as a viable system or nonsystem in a country as large as America. It was all right for Blake or for Thoreau, both of whom I admire immensely, but we'll never get it so full-blooded again. All we can do is keep pricking our government all the time, disobeying all we dare (after all, we have livings to earn), asking why, maintaining a habit of distrust.

INTERVIEWER

You've urged fellow artists to seek depth by "digging for the mythical." Are you more interested in creating new myths or in re-examining old ones, as you did with the *Aeneid* in *A Vision of Battlements*?

BURGESS

At present I'm interested in what structuralism can teach us about myth. I don't think I can invent my own myths, and I still think there's a great deal of fictional revivification possible with regard to such myths as the Jason/Golden Fleece one (on which I plan a novel, incidentally). Existing myths carry useful depth, a profundity of meaning which saves the novelist a lot of inventive trouble.

INTERVIEWER

How does Jason's pursuit of the Golden Fleece apply to our time?

BURGESS

My Jason novel, if I ever write it, will just use the Argonaut story as a framework for picaresque adventures. No deeper significance.

INTERVIEWER

Have you considered basing a novel on myths associated with Oriental religions, as Mann did in *The Transposed Heads*?

BURGESS

Strangely, I've been contemplating making a musical play out of Mann's *The Transposed Heads*—very charming, but only a game despite the claims of psychological profundity sometimes made for it. I've six years in the East but am not greatly drawn to Eastern myths, except that of the endless Javanese shadow play, which is like *Finnegans Wake*, anyway. But I've thought of a novel based on Munshi Abdullah's *Hikayat*. That German hunger for the

East—Hesse as well as Mann—is very curious. They might not have seen it as so romantic if they'd been colonial officers. Perhaps that's what they really wanted to be.

INTERVIEWER

Structuralism plays a big part in *MF*. How important is it to you as a novelist of ideas?

BURGESS

Structuralism is the scientific confirmation of a certain theological conviction—that life is binary, that this is a duoverse and so on. What I mean is that the notion of essential opposition—not God/Devil but just x/y—is the fundamental one, and this is a kind of purely structuralist view. We end up with form as more important than content, with speech and art as phatic processes, with the big moral imponderables as mere hot air. Marshall McLuhan has been limping along this track independently of Lévi-Strauss. How marvelous that the essential bifurcation which is man is expressed in trousers that carry Lévi-Strauss's name.

INTERVIEWER

Along with establishing a firm connection between language and myth, you've also indicated about the future of the novel that “only through the exploration of language can the personality be coaxed into yielding a few more of its secrets.” Would you expand on that?

BURGESS

By extension of vocabulary, by careful distortion of syntax, by exploitation of various prosodic devices traditionally monopolized by poetry, surely certain indefinite or complex areas of the mind can more competently be rendered than in the style of, say, Irving Stone or Wallace.

INTERVIEWER

Are you ever tempted to lavish complex prose on a simple protagonist, as Flaubert did in *A Simple Heart*?

BURGESS

Try and make your language fit your concept of the subject more than the subject itself. "Here's this stupid man who's written a most highly wrought work about a housemaid called Félicité." But Flaubert was concerned, surely, with the nobility of that heart and lavished his prose riches upon it. Style is less a preoccupation than a perennial problem. Finding the right style for the subject, I mean. This must mean that the subject comes first and the style after.

INTERVIEWER

You've referred to yourself as a "serious novelist who is attempting to extend the range of subject matter available to fiction." How have you tried to do this?

BURGESS

I've written about the dying British empire, lavatories, structuralism, and so on, but I don't really think that that kind of subject matter is what I had in mind when I made that statement. I meant the modification of the sensibility of the British novel, which I may have achieved a little, a very little. The new areas are more technical than thematic.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Novel Now* you said that the novel is the only important literary form we have left. Why do you think this is true?

BURGESS

Yes, the novel is the only *big* literary form we have left. It is capable of enclosing the other, lesser, literary forms, from the play to the lyric poem. Poets are doing well enough, especially in

America, but they can't achieve the architectonic skill which once lay behind the epic (for which the novel is now a substitute). The short, sharp burst—in music as well as poetry—is not enough. The novel has the monopoly of *form* today.

INTERVIEWER

Granted this limited primacy of the novel, it's disturbing that novel sales in general are declining and that public attention is focused more on nonfiction. Are you tempted to turn more to biography, for example, in the future?

BURGESS

I shall carry on with novelizing and hope for some little reward on the side. Biography is very hard work, no room for invention. But if I were a young man now, I wouldn't dream of trying to become a professional novelist. But some day, perhaps soon, the old realization will come back—that reading about imaginary characters and their adventures is the greatest pleasure in the world. Or the second greatest.

INTERVIEWER

What is the first?

BURGESS

That depends upon your own tastes.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you regret becoming a professional novelist?

BURGESS

I think that the mental strain, the worry, you know, the self-doubt, are hardly worth the candle; the agonies of creation and the sense of responsibility to one's muse—all these various things become more than one can live with.

INTERVIEWER

Are the odds much longer today against anyone's sustaining himself by quality fiction writing?

BURGESS

I don't know. I know that the older I get the more I want to live and the less opportunity I have. I don't think I wanted to become chained to an art form; establishing one's identity through an art form, one is a kind of Frankenstein creating a monster, so to speak. I wish I could live easier; I wish I didn't have the sense of responsibility to the arts. More than anything, I wish I didn't have the prospect of having to write certain novels, which must be written because nobody else will write them. I wish I were freer, I like freedom; and I think I would have been much happier living as a colonial officer writing the odd novel in my spare time. Then I would have been happier than as a sort of professional man of letters, making a living out of words.

INTERVIEWER

Do film versions help or hinder novels?

BURGESS

Films help the novels they're based on, which I both resent and am grateful for. My *Clockwork Orange* paperback has sold over a million in America, thanks to dear Stanley. But I don't like being beholden to a mere filmmaker. I want to prevail through pure literature. Impossible, of course.

INTERVIEWER

You've referred to *A Vision of Battlements*, your first novel, "like all my stories since, as a slow and cruel stripping off of illusion," yet you are often called a comic writer. Is comedy by nature so cruel, or do you consider yourself more as a satirist?

BURGESS

Comedy is concerned with truth quite as much as tragedy; and the two, as Plato recognized, have something fundamental in common. They're both stripping processes; they both tear off externals and show man as a poor forked animal. Satire is a *particular* kind of comedy, limiting itself to particular areas of behavior, not to the general human condition. I don't think I'm a satirist.

INTERVIEWER

Are you a black humorist as well—or are all these categories too confining?

BURGESS

I think I'm a comic writer, *malgré moi*. My Napoleon is turning out comic, and I certainly didn't intend that. I don't think I know what black humor is. Satirist? Satire is a difficult medium, ephemeral unless there's tremendous vitality in the form itself—like *Absalom and Achitophel*, *Tale of a Tub*, *Animal Farm*: I mean, the work has to subsist as story or poetry even when the objects of the satire are forgotten. Satire is now an element in some other form, not a form in itself. I like to be called just a novelist.

INTERVIEWER

About ten years ago you wrote that you considered yourself a pessimist but believed that “the world has much solace to offer—love, food, music, the immense variety of race and language, literature, the pleasure of artistic creation.” Would you make up the same list of saving graces today?

BURGESS

Yes, no change.

INTERVIEWER

Georges Simenon, another professional, has said that “writing is not a profession but a vocation of unhappiness. I don’t think an artist can ever be happy.” Do you think this is true?

BURGESS

Yes, Simenon’s right. My eight-year-old son said the other day: “Dad, why don’t you write for *fun*?” Even he divined that the process as I practice it is prone to irritability and despair. I suppose, apart from my marriage, I was happiest when I was doing a teaching job and had nothing much to think about in the vacations. The anxiety involved is intolerable. And—I differ here from Simenon—the financial rewards just don’t make up for the expenditure of energy, the damage to health caused by stimulants and narcotics, the fear that one’s work isn’t good enough. I think, if I had enough money, I’d give up writing tomorrow.

